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ABSTRACT

In the 11 years since the devolution to local control of New Zealand schools, the role of the Board of Trustees chairperson has emerged as critical to the success of the school-community partnership, especially in small rural communities. A qualitative study examined the issues facing the Board chair, as a lay, elected school leader working in partnership with the school principal. Interviews were conducted with two male and two female chairpersons, all farmers having at least 4 years experience as trustees. Participants had a combined total of 25 years experience as trustees and 17 years experience as Board chairs. In each school, the principal was a teaching principal. Findings suggest that the job of the Board chair increases as school size decreases. Smaller schools have a smaller pool of available trustees and available expertise in the area of governance. In smaller schools, the principal must spend more time in the classroom teaching, has less time to devote to educational leadership, and therefore depends more on the Board chair. In addition, the intimacy of interpersonal relations is greater in smaller schools and communities, making some decisions and conflicts personally more difficult. Hornby's model of parental involvement in school governance is discussed, and it is suggested that the model needs substantial modification to address the unique characteristics of small rural schools. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/SV)

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School governance in rural communities – The role of the Board of Trustees chairperson in small New Zealand schools

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Abstract

In the eleven years since the devolution to self-management the role of the Board of Trustees chairperson has emerged as critical to the success of the school-community partnership particularly in small rural communities. The importance of this partnership has received little attention as an area for research. This paper discusses a recent study of issues facing the Board chair as a lay, elected school leader working in partnership with the school principal. A group of four Board chairs, all farmers, took part in a series of interviews in which they discussed their motivation to accept the position of Board chair and the challenges and frustrations they face in their role. The paper considers a model of parental input developed by Hornby (1990) and demonstrates why it requires substantial modification to address the unique characteristics of rural schools.

Introduction

My background as a rural parent and trustee has ensured that I retain a vital interest in rural education. In this discussion, I describe aspects of a recent New Zealand study of Board chairpersons focussing on the involvement of parents as school trustees.

Background to the study

The 1989 reforms to education administration, known as *Tomorrow's Schools* (Lange, 1988), led to the creation of radical new structures in an administrative system largely unchanged for decades. Introduced in October 1989, the reforms abolished the Department of Education, the regional Education Boards, all school committees and Boards of Governors and replaced these structures with a streamlined Ministry of Education and individual Boards of Trustees for each school. The Tomorrow's Schools reforms were based on the partnership model proposed in the report of the Taskforce to Review Education Administration (the Picot Report):

> *The running of learning institutions should be a partnership between the teaching staff, (the professionals) and the community. The mechanism for creating such a partnership will be a Board of Trustees.* (1988 p. xi)

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Each Board of Trustees (hereafter referred to as the Board) consisted of five elected parent representatives, the principal and an elected staff representative. Secondary schools also had an elected student representative and there was provision for Boards to co-opt a further four members to the Board to ensure that the Board had a range of skills and a fair representation of the parent community. The composition of Boards was designed to ensure that the powers of decision-making lay firmly with the parents of the school, as parent-elected members would always have the majority vote.

Boards of Trustees were given wide powers. The specific roles of the Board of Trustees and principal were defined in the Education Act, 1989. Under Section 75 of the Act, Boards of Trustees were given complete discretion to control the management of the school, as it felt fit. In practise, this control has obvious limitations. One of the main shifts in power was to give Boards of Trustees the employer role. While salaries remain centrally funded Boards of Trustees have the responsibility to employ staff and manage their performance. Trustees have control of the budget allocation, some control over buildings and grounds and increasing responsibilities for monitoring and reporting student achievement.

One of the main tasks of Boards was to formulate a school charter. The charter was intended to set out the objectives of each school "drawn up locally within national objectives" (Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988, p.xi). The charter was seen as the "lynchpin" of the structure and would act as a contract between the community and the institution and the institution and the state" (Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988, p.ix). Lange (1988) also saw the relationship between the state and the institution as a two-way contract. The relationship between the school and the state is of particular importance to this study.

The concept of 'partnership' was intended to be an important element of the education reforms – both the partnership between the school and its local community, and the partnership between the school and the state. The establishment of Boards of Trustees was fundamental to these partnerships because the Board of Trustees was to act both as the link between the community and school and as the agent of the school in its relationship with the crown. In pursuing the ideal of partnership, the New Zealand education reforms differed significantly from other models of devolution. In many

countries such as Britain and the United States, where education administration has been devolved to the site level, the power has shifted to the school itself through the principal. In the New Zealand model, the devolution was political rather .than administrative (Education Review Office, 1999a) because the power shifted from central government to local communities through the establishment of individual Boards of Trustees for each school.

Smelt (1998) summarised the reforms under four major headings; increased choice for parents between schools, devolution of power to individual school level, increased voice for parents through the Board of Trustees and also through the ability to leave the school or create a school within a school and a move to a contractual relationship between schools, the government and the community.

Historically, New Zealand governments have provided equal educational opportunities for all children, urban and rural (Baty,1989). This policy led to the establishment of a large number of small schools scattered throughout rural New Zealand. Currently over 65% of all New Zealand schools have teaching principals and the majority of these are in rural areas. This study focuses on school governance in small rural schools.

The research design chosen for this project was a qualitative case study approach that uses a comparative, inductive methodology. The case study approach is particularly suited to this study because it gives the framework to conduct an investigation of people in a particular role. In looking at the particularistic nature of case studies, Merriam looks at how the case focuses on a particular situation, event or programme. This makes case study a good design for focussing on a practical problem. Shaw (in Merriam, 1998 p 29) tells how case studies "concentrate attention on the way particular groups of people confront specific problems, taking a holistic view of the situation."

I chose to use interviewing as the primary method of gathering data. Interviewing is "one of the most common and powerful ways we use to try and understand our fellow beings" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 361). Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore people's view of reality and gain the "thick, rich data" qualitative research

is known for. This may make the analysis of data more difficult but it allows more flexibility in the data gathering. While I used a set of generic questions the participants often added other comments. Allowing for this flexibility enabled me to gain some systematic data but also allowed for issues that were important to the Board Chairs to emerge.

Participants were selected to meet the following criteria:

- schools within a two hour drive from my home;
- schools with teaching principals;
- chairpersons who have held the position for at least one full year; and
- a mix of male and female participants.

There was no measure made of the effectiveness of the school, staff or Board of Trustees when selecting participants. In reality, finding participants was the easiest part of the process and more people were keen to take part in the study than I could accommodate. The group comprised two men and two women, all farmers and all of who have been trustees for at least four years. The participants had a combined total of 25 years experience as school trustees and 17 years as Board Chairs. Each participant agreed to take part in two interviews, provide me with school documentation and allow me to observe at Board of Trustee meetings. Later in the study, I asked them to keep a log of time spent on Board of Trustee business. All interviews were taped and transcribed and the transcripts returned to participants for checking. For some this was a formality, whereas others took the opportunity to add to and clarify some of their responses.

Participants were pleased to talk of their experiences as a Board of Trustees chair. They were keen to be listened to and wanted their voices heard. The conversations largely took place over coffee in the farm kitchen and the tapes are punctuated by the noise of dogs, cattle and birdsong. I have kept in touch with participants by telephone and letter and this relationship has enabled me to gather further data where necessary.

The research revealed some fascinating findings in relation to the skills and training needed, the leadership style adopted by Board chairs and the tension between central

and local government. The importance of the relationship between the principal and the Board chair was also highlighted. In this paper I limit the scope of my discussions on the research findings to examining parent participation in education in small rural schools.

Much has been written of the importance of parental involvement in their children's schooling. Research conducted in New Zealand (Ramsay, Harold, Hawk, Kaii & Poskitt, 1989, p.9) stated: "There are highly significant gains for parents, for teachers and above all for students if parents and caregivers become fully involved in their children's education."

Several theoretical models have been created (Hornby, 1990; Ramsay et al., 1993) to arrange levels of parent involvement in education in a hierarchical structure.

Hornby (1990) developed a theoretical model to guide the practice of parent involvement. His model, (see Figure 1), consisted of two pyramids, one a hierarchy encompassing parent needs and the other encompassing parent strengths and possible contributions. Hornby argued that all parents have some needs and strengths but only a small number have an intense need for guidance or have the capability of making an extensive contribution especially in the area of governance. His framework shows a broad base encompassing all parents at the information and communication stages, tapering off to a few parents that give policy support such as through membership of school governing bodies or advocacy groups.

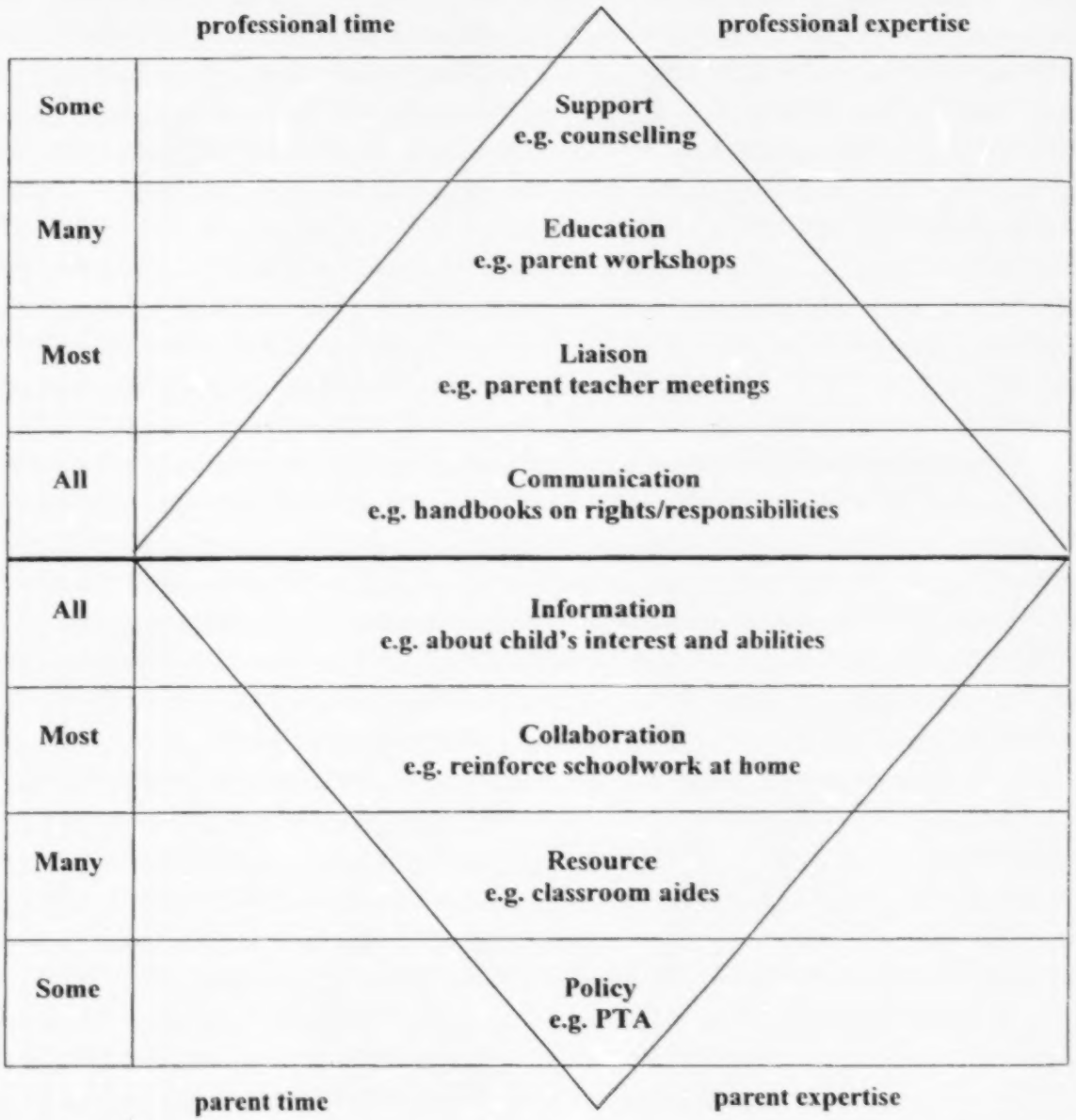

Figure 1: Parent involvement in education (after Hornby, 1990)

This model provides an interesting framework in which to look at parent involvement in school governance. Rural communities throughout much of New Zealand are experiencing a decline in population. Farms are amalgamating into larger units, family size is dropping and as a general trend, the number of primary school age children is declining throughout the country.

Changes in the nature of rural communities compound the pressures of the Board chair. All participants talked about changes that were occurring in their communities. For Yellow School, the reduction in student numbers has changed its status to a single teacher school. Green School is considering merger options and Blue and Orange schools have both had their rolls drop by half in the last ten years. Empty houses on farms, and in the rural communities, are often rented to single parents and beneficiaries and Board chairs noted that these people were more transient and less likely to be involved in the life of the school and community. Mike noted that there had been substantial changes in the Blue School community:

> *Because of both parents working, the rural trend is that there are not many guys employing labour any more. Farms are going larger, but there is one guy managing ... 1000 or 1500 acres and he just gets casual guys in to work ... You have got people that are sort of 'fly by nighters' ... and they sent their kids to school because it is convenient and they don't take part in anything.* (Mike)

This change in the nature of the community was especially apparent at Calf Club Day, an important event in small rural schools. Yellow School no longer held its own day because of the decline in animal numbers. For Blue School the change over the last ten years was also very evident. Mike continued:

> *So from a school of 56 pupils we have probably only got- I think it is between less than 30 that are actually involved in agriculture and at one stage nearly 70 or 80% of the children were involved in agriculture. So the calf club for example was a really strong day. You'd have up to 30 calves and you had anything from 50 to 60 lambs, but now you would be struggling to get 10 calves and probably 10 lambs.* (Mike)

The very rapid drop in school rolls is creating problems for the Boards as funding for schools has a significant per capita component:

> *We are constantly struggling to stretch the budget ... If your roll goes down the fixed costs are very much the same ... but there is not a lot you can cut back on.* (Prue)

Another consequence of the drop in school rolls is that there are fewer parents available to be trustees. Rural Boards of Trustees may face problems because they have a smaller group of parents to draw trustees from and they often have difficulty in accessing appropriate training due to their isolation (Yeoman, 1997).

Board chairs were concerned about this. Dave worried about what would happen when all available people in the community had had their turn at being a trustee.

> *Because we have had 10 or 11 years of Boards of Trustees, in most communities we had been through [all the potential trustees] and communities aren't changing. They haven't got younger people; the farmers are all getting older in rural communities.* (Dave)

The drop in school rolls also means a decline in the staff numbers at the schools. This has led to strenuous efforts by some communities to self-fund extra staff. At Orange School, the Parent Teacher Association raised $10,000 in 2000 to fund a part time third teacher. Yellow School allocated significant funds to increase the teacher aide hours to support the sole charge principal. Blue School could face the issue of redeployment in the next few years and Mike worried about the impact of the Board's responsibility for carrying out the redeployment exercise on the staff–trustee relationship. Board chairs were put in difficult situations in such instances.

> *I can't see where the Board's gone wrong. We have tried to market the school to the best of our ability ... and at the end of the day someone has got to bite the bullet and say, "You have got to go." Now whether I am the person to tell that teacher, I don't know ... you have got to go through it [the process] and at the end of the day someone is going to get very hurt and very emotional and it is going to be quite difficult for us.* (Mike)

Changing social structures and employment patterns are beyond the control of Boards of Trustees yet the nature and pace of this change impacts on their job, making it more difficult.

The theoretical model of parent participation proposed a hierarchical progression of parent involvement (Hornby, 1990). This model maintained that while most parents were involved at the basic level, only a few had the skills, expertise or interest to be involved at policy level. This study has shown that in small rural schools the triangle needs to change shape to a trapezoid and in fact, the smaller the school, the flatter the trapezoid. In the case of Yellow School, with a total of nine families, at any one time over half the total families will be involved in school governance. For Blue and Orange Schools, the proportion is about a quarter and in the larger Green School, probably nearer to a tenth. In a city school of 500 pupils about 2% of families will be

involved as trustees – the difference is significant and has some interesting ramifications both on terms of skill level and commitment.

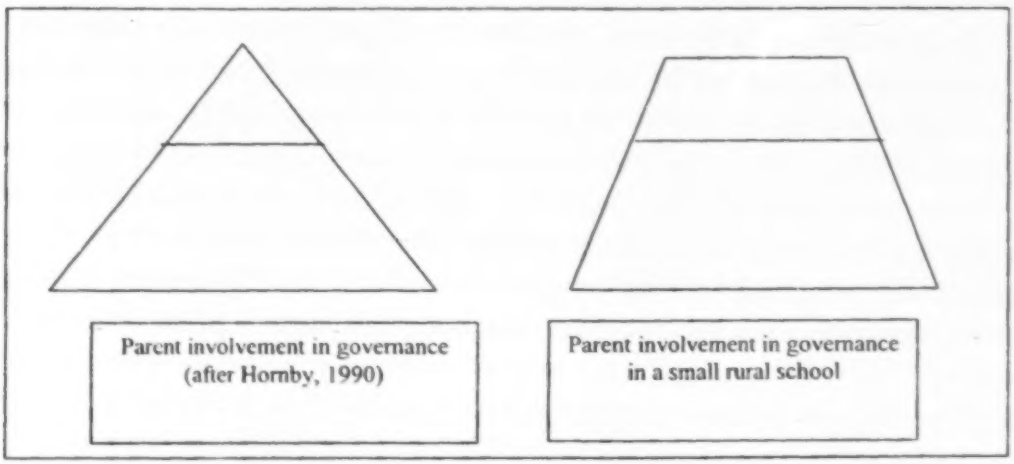

Figure 2: Revised model of parent involvement in governance

The revised model can shed light on several issues. It may partially explain the theory of reluctance. If potential trustees are drawn from a much smaller pool, there may be more difficulty in getting trustees with the range of skills required for Board responsibilities. Similarly, if there is a much smaller pool of people to draw from, it seems likely that it will be harder to find leaders and there will have to be some degree of persuasion to get someone to take on the Board chair role. The level of trustee skills has been discussed in a number of reports (Gordon et al., 1994; Wylie, 1997a, 1999; ERO, 1999) and the difference in potential trustees' skills is most apparent in the high socio-economic level schools compared to low socio-economic level schools. Trustees in 'rich' schools have higher levels of education and are more likely to have professional occupations. Trustees in 'poor' schools are more likely to lack these skills and so look to co-opt trustees with business skills to assist the Board. Rural trustees are less likely to hold tertiary qualifications than their urban counterparts and only 15% of rural trustees have professional occupations compared to 50% of trustees in cities. Lack of expertise of trustees combined with the multiple roles expected of rural principals can lead to an increase in potential conflicts (Wylie 1997b).

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The disparity between Boards whose members have professional skills and those who do not, is widened by the fact that those who do not have legal or accounting expertise on their Boards not only find some concepts of governance more difficult but also have to buy in the legal or financial expertise they need whereas the rich schools have expertise provided free (Gordon et al., 1994). The same principle applies to rural schools and again, the likelihood of having trustees with professional skills decreases the more remote and small the school is, while the cost of obtaining these skills increases with distance from a main centre. Rural school boards had around half the legal and industrial relations skills amongst their members as schools in other locations and fewer human resources/personnel skills (Wylie, 1997b).

All of the Board chairs in this study talked about the issue of attracting and retaining suitable trustees from a small pool of potential candidates both in number and range of occupations.

> *In a town it is probably easier and they also have way more diverse skills on the board and you probably have got the odd lawyer or accountant [and] people with degrees and professional qualifications and all sorts of occupations, out here you are limited. Basically if it is not a farmer it will be somebody who has been on a social benefit or something, living in a farm cottage.* (Mike)

Their comments agree with the ERO (1999) study of small schools that noted difficulty in obtaining a range of skills among trustees was a problem for very small schools.

A further dimension can be added by considering the motivation behind parent participation, which may give insight into why parents are prepared to act as trustees. The German sociologist Tonnies, writing in 1887 (cited in Sergiovanni, 1994), originally used the terms gemeinschaft and gesellschaft to show the shifts from hunting and gathering to the industrial society. At each shift, Tonnies claimed, there was a move from the concept of a sacred community (gemeinschaft) to a more secular society (gesellschaft). The social concepts of gemeinschaft and gesellschaft have been used by later writers (Harold, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1994) to add a further dimension to the study of school-community partnerships by examining the nature of the relationship between the parents and the school. The geimeinschaft relationship is

based on " trust, intimacy and loyalty" (Harold, 1999, p.10). It comes from a common set of values, of sharing a common location, and of working together as a community (Sergiovanni, 1994). The gesellschaft relationship is a more business-like model relying on contractual relationships and less personal connections. Connections between people are more contrived and while groups coexist they are essentially separated. The Board of Trustees was created under a gesellschaft model of New Right market forces, yet the voluntary nature of the job and the partnership between school and community has geimenschaft overtones. Tonnies (cited in Sergiovanni, 1994) differentiated between natural will and rational will in explaining relationships. In geimeinschaft, people relate to each other and work together because they intrinsically want to (i.e. natural will). In gesellschaft people are using rational will and are motivated by what tangible reward they will obtain.

The Board chairs had simi'ar reasons for joining the Board and generally their reasons had to do with supporting their children, the school and the community. This could be seen as geimenschaft. For Dave, it was "the chance to make things better for kids." He could see some huge deficiencies in the system and wanted to make a difference. Prue's reason for joining the Board was also that she was interested in kids and wanted to have some input into the school her children were attending. Mike echoed this view and also felt it was "my turn." For Sue, the motivation was more pragmatic. Her husband was retiring from the Board and the trustees accepted his resignation on the proviso that Sue accepted cooption to the Board. All the participants were active members of the community and were prepared to help the school. The theme of community service featured strongly in their motivation to become a trustee.

The motivation to become Board chair was a different story. One of the early questions I asked participants w.s how they became the Chairperson of their Board of Trustees. None of the participants actively sought and most did not want the chairperson's job. Two of the participants became Board chair by default as the following quotes illustrate:

> *I was it – there was no-one else.* (Sue)

It came down to the other person who had just had a short time on the Board and myself, but her husband didn't want her to do it so I took the job. (Prue)

Mike was persuaded to stand for the position to provide an alternative to another candidate who wanted to be Board chair but who had no experience "and she came in with the proviso she was …going to change everything." (Mike)

Dave explained that in his case, he was the logical choice for Board chair as he was the only trustee with any experience after the election and he was prepared to be the leader. After completing an initial term on the board as a trustee he decided that he would prefer to lead "rather than getting frustrated 'sitting in the back seat of the bus'."

It appears that rather than the Board chair being a position trustees aspire to, in most of these cases the participants had little choice and were in this sense, 'reluctant leaders'.

Participants stood for the Board because they wanted to make a contribution to the school and community but most participants did not seek or even want the Board chair position.

There are two aspects of motivation that need to be explored – the motivation to become a trustee and the motivation to become the Board chair. An early study (Middleton & Oliver, 1990), revealed that approximately a third of trustees surveyed stood for election because they had previously served on a governing body and another third because they were approached to do so by specific individuals or community groups. Other reasons mentioned included a long involvement with the community and being well known locally. Later research, (O'Connell, 1995; Hawk, 1997) also found that standing as a trustee was an extension of previous community involvement. There was also an element of reciprocity involved, where parents wanted to be involved at the school their children were attending. The Board chairs in this study became trustees because they wanted to support their own children, contribute to the school and their community and because they thought they could make a difference. An example of this was Dave who spoke of one of the rewards of

the job as seeing children achieve and seeing the community and the school working together. This sense of community duty ties in with the concept of geimeinschaft (Sergiovanni, 1994) where the motivation to do things comes from a common set of community values.

The motivation to become Board chair was somewhat different and it was an interesting and unexpected finding that most of the Board chairs were "reluctant leaders" and had taken on the position largely because there was no one else able or prepared to do so. I could find little evidence of other research in this area although Hawk (1997) noted that three of the six Board chairs in her study were reluctant to assume the position of Board chair and none of the six participants had actively sought the position. This concept of a 'reluctant leader' appears to add a further dimension to educational leadership and is an area that warrants further study.

The issue of role distinction can create pressure for Board chairs. It was important for them to separate their trustee role from their parent and community member roles:

> *As far as I'm concerned if I'm not at a board meeting or doing something for the board, I'm just one of the [community] members, and if we've got a fundraising thing on and somebody else is in charge of that, then that person is in charge. I don't go poking my nose in. I ask them what they want me to do. We've all got our places.* (Sue)

The issue of confidentiality could be problematic in rural communities. For example problems can occur when personnel issues arise in a school because trustees cannot discuss what is going on with anyone in the community. Others in the community often know that something is going on but they cannot be told about any action that is being taken because the matter was discussed by the Board 'in committee.' One participant mentioned a situation where there were complaints about the principal's performance that were being investigated by the Board. In this case, the participant knew exactly what was happening but could not share the information with others in the community. He went to the local chartered club for a drink after work but found everyone there wanted to find out what was happening at the school:

> *This is where you have a situation. It had to be kept secret, it had to be kept within the four walls of the board meeting. We have a club down the road here, I know - it was the first week of December - I went down for a*

drink on a Friday night after milking and I didn't get in the door. I came home because that is how bad it was. It divided the community right down the middle, because we couldn't tell them anything. (Mike)

Several Board chairs spoke of the personal cost of being a leader in a small community. Dave put it like this:

It is pretty tough stuff all right and it becomes extremely personal where I think that you are exposed to some of these personal things that are beyond your control and you haven't created the situations. (Dave)

The closeness of the school to the community can create extra pressures for Board chairs in their relationship with the community and in managing the principal's performance, but can also have positive impacts. Wright (2000) contended that small schools tend to have staff committed to their community because of the time spent within it and the 'intimacy inherent in small populations.' The Board chairs in this study acknowledge the intimacy that exists in country districts as Sue highlighted in her discussion on the contribution the community made to the school. One principal described it as "living and working under a microscope" (Martin, 1999, p. 22). The nature of the school community partnership is such that negotiation is a constant feature. There is a very real danger of negotiation turning into conflict which if unresolved can completely divide a community and create permanent divisions. Most rural communities have factions that have 'fallen out' over minor issues at some stage in the past. One Board chair related the story of a conflict between Board members that resulted in a trustee resigning acrimoniously and added he had not spoken to that person since then. There seems no easy solution to this problem.

While there are mechanisms in place to work through procedures such as redeployment, the intimacy of small communities makes the human cost of decisions more transparent. Mike knows that redeployment is likely to occur at Blue School within the next twelve months, he knows there is a process the Board has to follow but he worries about hurting community members by making them redundant. He also knows that if he is the Board chair at that stage, he will be the one to tell one of the teachers that they no longer have a job. In a similar way, the Board at Yellow School discussed whether to leave the lawn mowing contract with a local person or let it more cheaply to a larger contractor. Again, because of the nature of the small community, Sue felt the personal responsibility for making the decision and relaying it to the

person concerned. As in the discussion on community conflict, there is no obvious solution to this tension but the findings highlight the need for Board chairs to have easy access to support from external agencies such as the School Trustees Association when faced with difficult personnel decisions.

In a small rural community, Sue and Mike are certain to meet the people they have been dealing with in their 'employer' role as Board chair, at community functions where their role is that of friends and neighbours in the district. The part time voluntary nature of the Board chair position makes implementing these personnel decisions very difficult.

The findings of this study have led me to make the tentative conclusion that the job of the Board chair increases as the school size decreases. The study has found evidence to support this tentative theory in a number of areas. As school size decreases so does the pool of available trustees and the expertise available to the school in the area of governance. As school size decreases, the greater the time that the principal must spend in the classroom teaching and the less time they have for educational leadership therefore the more the Board chair does to support the principal. And, with the decrease in school size, there is a corresponding increase in the intimacy of interpersonal relations. Small schools seldom have experienced executive staff to provide administrative support therefore Board chairs take a greater 'hands on' role.

Similarly the more remote the school, the greater the need for support both for principals, who tend to be less experienced than their city counterparts, and for Board chairs. Sue spoke of the reluctance of her trustees to travel over an hour to the nearest town for trustee training and Board chairs all recognised the increased costs of being rural and remote. The implications of falling rolls in rural areas were causing concern to all the participants.

Overall, this study has highlighted the impact of the Tomorrow's Schools reforms on small rural schools and focussed attention on the role of the Board chair. It showed that the rural Board chair is often working under difficult circumstances to provide leadership while at the same time, attending to the challenging range of tasks required

of the role. Several issues have emerged that warrant further study including the questions:

- Is the phenomenon of reluctant leadership widespread among Board chairs?
- How can Board chairs operate in a gemeinschaft way within a system that is increasingly gesselschaft driven ?

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